

Comprehensive Needs Assessment Process

Purpose

The purpose of a comprehensive needs assessment is to examine multiple sources of data to identify the most important academic needs within a school. This data assists schools in monitoring and assessing the impact of programs and instruction on student achievement. The analysis of the data can guide in the improvement of the instructional practices within the school. These decisions should be based on data rather than assumptions.

The comprehensive needs assessment focuses on gathering data in five specific areas: student achievement, curriculum and instruction, professional development, parental and community involvement, and school perspective and organization. If possible, the school should develop five committees, each focused on gathering data within one of these categories. These committees should evaluate what data will provide the most information concerning the most pressing needs of the school. In order to compare the achievement between subgroups, data should be disaggregated based on gender, race and ethnicity, economically disadvantaged, and limited English proficiency. Data may be examined across multiple years, grade levels or schools to identify patterns and trends.

The Five Areas of Concentration

The following should be addressed when planning the comprehensive needs assessment:

- **Student Achievement**
 - How well are the students attaining the challenging academic standards set by the state and school district?
 - What are school completions or mobility rates? How many students are making smooth transitions from one grade and/or school to the next?
 - Is there a reduction in the rate of students leaving the school, either as a result of making a voluntary transfer or because they are dropping out of the system?
 - How well do students perform on state assessments, in general, and in identified subgroups and individually? (Include English Language Learners, Migrant, Homeless, and N&D students, if applicable.)
 - Are measurable goals for achievement known by parents, teachers, and students?
 - What are the graduation and attendance rates?
 - Are there significant disciplinary issues?
 - Are there intervention processes to ensure individual students' educational needs are being met in a timely manner?
 - What non-academic indicators of student success does the school have in place?

- **Curriculum and Instruction**
 - What are teachers and administrators doing to ensure that teaching methods are up to date and the curriculum reflects state, local, and federal content standards?
 - What opportunities are there on the job to improve the curriculum, raise expectations of staff, and secure high-quality instructional materials?
 - Are frameworks in the core content areas supported by scientifically-based research?
 - If assessment instruments, including diagnostic assessments, are routinely used (at least 3-4 times per year) to measure student achievement in language arts/reading and mathematics, are the results used to inform curriculum, instruction, and individual interventions?
 - What role do teachers play in deciding what assessments will be used to measure student achievement?
 - If instructional technology is available for all students, how does the integration of technology affect teaching and learning?
 - Is there an evaluation of instructional programs and practices?
 - How do staff members express high expectations for student achievement?

- **Professional Development**
 - Are there ongoing and embedded opportunities for administrators, teachers, and other staff members to participate in meaningful professional development?
 - Do staff members select the professional development opportunities available to them?
 - What topics attract the largest groups of participants?
 - Who participates?
 - What follow-up takes place?
 - Are staff members working in a collaborative effort as team members and mentors?
 - What instrument can reliably assess the extent to which staff members are collaborating?
 - What can be done to further promote and enhance collaboration among staff members?
 - What is the relationship between professional development and classroom instruction?
 - Does the daily teacher schedule allow for common planning time across grade levels and content areas?
 - How are professional development opportunities evaluated and mid-course corrections made, if needed.

- **Parental and Community Involvement**
 - In what ways are parents and the community involved in meaningful activities that support student learning?
 - How are parents and the community involved in school decisions?

- Are health and human services available to support students and encourage healthy family relationships?
 - If families speak languages other than English, are school messages communicated in those languages?
 - Do services for families include students with disabilities, both physical and educational?
 - Can parents develop their own parenting skills or gain access to other educational opportunities through the school?
 - Do teachers routinely communicate with parents (formally and informally) about the academic progress of their children?
 - Are parents and community members involved in school and district governance decisions?
 - What are any partnerships with local social service and business organizations?
 - What are the community perceptions of the school or district?
 - Is there any evaluation of parent and community involvement strategies?
- **School Perspective and Organization**
 - How large are classes?
 - Is adequate time devoted to subjects where students perform poorly?
 - Do staff members have a voice in decision making and school policies?
 - What role do staff members have in deciding what assessment will be used to evaluate individual students of the program as a whole?
 - Do school committees and decision-making bodies make it easier for teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, support staff, and students to be heard?
 - Are all groups to be part of solutions to identified problems?
 - What are the school or district's vision and mission, and how do they inform teaching and learning?
 - Is the staff involved in making decisions about instruction?
 - What is the progress the organization has made in the last 2-3 years toward meeting student achievement and instructional goals?
 - What are the roles of the central office staff, principals, curriculum specialists (such as coaches) and teachers in leading instructional improvement?
 - How is the budget determined and priorities set? Is there equitable allocation and distribution of available resources (e.g., people, materials, time, and fiscal, including all ESEA funds)?
 - What are the discipline and safety policies?
 - What is the climate and culture of the school?

Step 1: Develop a Planning Team

A principal, school leader, or a district official usually convenes a small representative group from the school to begin in pre-planning. (The team should include knowledgeable people who know and have the confidence of the school's various stakeholder groups.) This group should be committed to the concept of whole-school reform, and it should recognize the possibilities for children that the schoolwide option offers. Usually, the pre-planning group includes the principal or his/her designee; teachers, school staff familiar with ESEA Title I, Part A, and other federal programs; and parents or community leaders who have already been previously involved in Title I work or school improvement planning.

A. Early issues for the pre-planning group to consider

- Is there an existing team or committee that can serve as a schoolwide planning team? To avoid duplicating ongoing planning activities, use the developed expertise of the staff within the school.
- If a new team needs to be established, how will its members be recruited, selected, and replaced over time? Encourage volunteers or ask stakeholder groups (departments, teams, or classified staff) to elect representatives.
- How will the planning team develop a collaborative working relationship among its members? What activities will it use to transform team members from a collection of individuals into a true team?
- How will the planning team coordinate with other committees or teams in the school and district?
- What autonomy will the schoolwide planning team have to make decisions or recommendations?
- How will the planning team communicate with the groups it represents, and with community members who have a stake in the success of the school and its schoolwide program?

B. Selecting the Planning Team

Selecting and supporting an effective planning team is important because its members will lead the comprehensive needs assessment (Step 2 of the planning process). Because total school reform is the goal, it is necessary to conduct a more in-depth self-study than those undertaken in past ESEA programs. The planning strategies a school selects to meet this goal will depend on the judgment and experience of its planning team.

C. Members of the Comprehensive Needs Planning Team

- School and district administrators
- Teachers representing all grades, content areas, and teams
- Representatives of other professional staff, including social workers, psychologists, counselors or diagnostic specialists, and curriculum leaders
- Parents and community representatives

- Representatives of organizations, groups, and parents of students served by the federal programs whose funds are used in the schoolwide program
- Students

A team leader should be selected from the members. Rarely will the principal have time to lead the team so the team leader should have the confidence and backing of the principal, and the principal should be kept informed of the team's activities.

The actual number of members on the schoolwide planning team will vary from school to school, but interviews with team leaders indicate that a core group of 12 or fewer is easiest to coordinate and manage. This group can work most effectively by relying on the talents of many other people through a subcommittee structure.

The core planning team is responsible for creating a program that meets local, state, and federal education requirements and community expectations. In time, this group will advocate the school plan to the school community as well as to district and state decision makers. A team should be sufficiently diverse to represent the schools' key stakeholders. Such a group will likely have the credibility it needs to gain widespread support for the plan.

Step 2: Conducting a Comprehensive Needs Assessment

The comprehensive needs assessment should be the focus of the planning process. This is the database from which the planning team develops its schoolwide plan. Through the needs assessment, a school identifies strengths and weaknesses and specifies priorities for improving student achievement and meeting challenging academic standards. Conducting a needs assessment helps planners focus on schoolwide issues and link goals with hard data. The team must gather enough data to direct its planning, but not so much data that the group is unable to determine a focus.

A. Determining Data Collection Methods and Plans

Data sources include school and district records and reports; statistics from community-based organizations; face-to-face or telephone interviews; focus groups; classroom and schoolwide observations; examples of students' work; and evaluation results.

Potential Sources of Information

The following types of individuals may be surveyed, interviewed, or consulted in focus groups:

- Teachers
- Administrators
- Clerical and operational support staff
- Counselors, psychologist, and social workers
- Parents

- School volunteers
- Health services workers
- District office officials
- Mentors and partners
- Neighborhood business
- Students

B. Collecting Data and Summarizing Evidence

Good planning makes the process of collecting and analyzing information efficient. For example, if a team decides to use or adapt existing surveys, questionnaires, and other tools for gathering information, it's a good idea to test the instruments with people in your school to make sure they are easy to administer and the questions contain accurate information. Experienced planning teams offer the following tips:

- Ensure questions are phrased appropriately and every question is necessary.
- Explain the purpose of each activity and why these questions are being asked. Letters to stakeholders about the survey should describe how the information will be used, emphasizing the fact that participation is voluntary.
- Assure those surveyed that their individual answers will be kept confidential.
- Give enough time to think about answers and return surveys without being rushed.
- Be available to answer questions.
- Know the audience -- make sure questions will be easily understood by those taking the analysis instruments. Do not use educational jargon or phrases.
- Ensure every data collection tool is brief and to the point. Although information gathering is important, avoid collecting more information than the team can handle.
- Think about how the team will summarize the information that the tools will generate.
- If using a computerized survey, make sure that the stakeholders have access to the necessary technology. The team may have to make arrangements for this at the school during meetings, conferences, athletic events, etc.

C. Analyzing Program Needs and Setting Goals

Analyzing data is one of the most important steps in the comprehensive needs assessment because it determines the planning team's goals for improving the teaching and learning in the school. Data analysis should seek to answer the following types of questions:

- What are the strengths and needs of the current educational program in our school?
- Does the evidence support assertions about strengths and needs?

- If more information is needed, what will be the follow- up process?
- What priorities does the information suggest?
- What was learned about how needs vary for different groups in schools? For example, what are the unique needs among girls and boys, various ethnic groups, students with limited English proficiency or with disabilities, migrant students, or new immigrants?
- From the review of the data, is it possible to state student needs in ways that specify goals, benchmarks for progress, and outcome expectations in measurable terms?

After preliminary, open-ended discussions of these issues among subcommittee members, the findings should be summarized. Because it is difficult for a school to address many large issues in any one year, most planning experts suggest that teams prioritize the major topics they will address and begin with just one or two major issues the first year, setting longer-term goals or focus areas that can be addressed two or three years down the road. These can be updated as the plan progresses. These updates will be placed in the Continuous School Improvement Plan (CSIP) every year.

Summary

A Comprehensive Needs Assessment is a complete evaluation of a school's strengths and weaknesses. The concept of a needs assessment is to build on the school's strengths and improve areas of weakness. Educators are expected to use data from the needs assessment to write a school improvement plan that has specific targets and strategies designed by the school stakeholders to improve the school and student achievement. The process used is almost as important as the data that is collected.